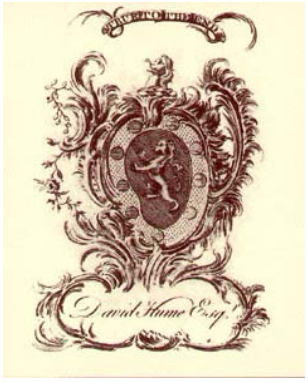

Review of Hume et La Naissance du Libetarisme Economique
Shirley Robin Letwin
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Hume et La Naissance du Libéralisme Economique. By Didier Deleule. (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1979) Pp.414.

Even more than other philosophers, Hume has been endowed with many different and contradictory characters -- sceptic and dogmatic empiricist, social scientist and historian, naturalist and purveyor of common sense. M. Deleule has entered the arena, as many before him, with the ambition of settling the difficulties. He addresses himself in particular to the division between those who see Hume as the founder of political economy, and those who regard his writings on economics as trivial and incoherent. There is, of course, a good precedent for such an enterprise in the long reign of Halévy's view of Bentham.

Like Halévy, M. Deleule assumes that advocacy of a market economy must rest on a belief in a natural harmony of interests and the pre-eminence of economic well-being over all other aspects of social life. He gives Hume the credit for having introduced this new outlook by breaking with the philosophers of natural law and recognizing that promoting survival is the end of social life. Again, like other Continental interpreters, Deleule concludes that Hume's standpoint implies that there is a natural antagonism between justice and prosperity, since the former requires constraints deliberately imposed on social activity, while the latter is achieved through the spontaneous accumulation of individual activities much as a wall is built, brick by brick, without any prior design to indicate its final shape. Moreover, the natural sentiment of attachment to family and friends, on which economic prosperity thrives, obstructs the efforts of society as a whole to deal with scarcity and insecurity.

But on the other hand, Deleule recognizes, as Halévy did not, a fundamental difference between the British and the Physiocratic idea of a natural harmony of interests. He points out that, unlike Quesnay, Hume argued that letting nature take her course did not mean that all intervention should be proscribed, but rather that intervention should not be violent. In this disagreement between Hume and Quesnay, Deleule finds the seeds of two different forms of liberalism. These, he argues, have regularly been confounded by the crude notion of liberalism which neglects to notice that the name comprehends two distinct models of social life.

Whereas Quesnay and the Physiocrats thought of nature as a providential order which cannot be changed, Hume rejected the 'metaphysics of order'. In pointing this out to a French audience, M. Deleule has done a great service to the understanding both of eighteenth-century British thought and of a market economy. The tendency to equate opposition to the organization of economic life by centralized planning with a belief in a natural order that operates entirely independently of human artifice has become as prevalent in Britain as in France, and has come to confuse advocates of a market economy as much as its opponents.

But in other aspects of his study, M. Deleule has fallen into a fairly traditional Continental kind of misconception of Hume. He takes Hume's enterprise to be an effort to construct a social science. Here, of course, he is at one with many interpreters outside the Continent. Besides, he adds a rare refinement by pointing out that Hume regarded economics as one of the philosopher's proper objects of reflection, and not distinct from politics, because the philosopher for Hume is an expert in the study of human nature and economic activities are a peculiarly striking manifestation of human nature. But Deleule goes on to say that

the leading idea of Hume's social science is the idea of animal economy. That this idea was the subject of an article in the Encyclopedia does not worry M. Deleule as much as it might. He takes Hume's subscription to the idea to indicate that he departed from Newtonianism by rejecting a mechanical model for social phenomena in favour of a biological model.

The biological analogy led Hume to insist, according to Deleule, that social order is not established once and for all as in a watch and doomed to destruction if any change occurs. It led Hume to argue that no mechanical formula can capture the nature of social order and that cohesion can coexist with change because a social order is constantly adjusting to circumstances in much the same way as the animal body does. That is why Hume refused to think of constitutional balance as a simple mechanical balance between two opposing forces and formulated instead a theory of dynamic balance based on checks which allow for constant movement.

For economics, Hume did what Machiavelli did for politics -- he 'deconstructed' the mechanisms of apparently neutral discourse. He did not regard the existing state of society as an unchangeable order made by non-human design but as one possible issue of a combination of elements. That was why Hume excluded the possibility of going back just as he denied the possibility of projecting too far into the future. He accordingly argued that intervention in economic activities is the imposition of one artifice on another and that intervention will be as good or bad as the degree to which it takes account of circumstances and human nature. Hume was, in short, M. Deleule maintains, a supreme realist.

What the idea of animal economy leads M. Deleule to conclude about Hume is not very different

from what others have discovered without reference to that idea. His way of arriving at those conclusions leads M. Deleule to endow Hume's philosophy with connotations which from another standpoint would seem to be alien to it. But to those wedded to Continental views of philosophy, Deleule's study may make more accessible an accurate idea of Hume's conclusions even if not of his way of thinking.

Shirley Robin Letwin